

“His Paper Family Knew Their Place”: Diasporic Space in Wayson Choy’s *All That Matters*¹

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I. Arrested Bodies: Diasporic Matters on the West Coast

On the morning of August 13, 2010, a cargo ship called the MV Sun Sea pulled into Esquimalt Harbour on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. The ship had left Thailand ninety days earlier, filled with 493 Sri Lankan Tamils seeking refuge in North America. However, its arrival on Canada’s west coast followed weeks of government and media rhetoric announcing the pending invasion of the Canadian border by terrorists and human smugglers (Burgmann). Canadian border guards met and quickly relayed the migrants to awaiting cells at various detention centres in the lower mainland, while government officials declared the detainment of Tamil migrants necessary for public safety until their papers could be fully analyzed (“Tamil Migrants”). Dominating media coverage, the “processing” of paper identities began to eclipse the incarcerated bodies of Tamil migrants and, two months after their arrival on Canadian shores, more than 450 of the refugee claimants remained in a state of indefinite detention.

Contrary to celebratory discourses of diasporic mobility in which, as James Clifford writes in his seminal 1994 essay, “separate places become effectively a single community” (303), the movement of bodies across geopolitical borders and within hostland communities remains fraught in the current transnational moment. Bodies marked by race and gender, as well as those lacking the material means of migration, risk becoming entangled in the legislative, systemic, social, and ultimately concrete barriers inscribed by both the host nation and the diaspora itself: for some, diasporic mobility simultaneously (and paradoxically) begets diasporic bondage. The following essay examines the fictional representation of diasporic bondage in Wayson Choy’s *All That Matters* (2004), a novel that traces the struggles of the Chen family in the Chinese Canadian diaspora in Vancouver around the period of WWII. My reading of Choy’s novel aims to trouble uncritical celebrations of diasporic mobility in relation to both fictional and real, past and present Canadian contexts. As it continues to do for Tamil migrants in the present, the Canadian West Coast poses geographic and political barriers for Choy’s fictional characters, relegating their bodies to detainment facilities, limiting their social mobility, and

privileging their paper over their biological identities (a diasporic conundrum I will address later in this paper via the concept of “paper ontologies”). As my close reading of Choy’s novel reveals, these barriers to mobility are especially acute for diasporic women. Presenting a vital corrective to overvalorizations of mobility in diasporic criticism, drawing attention to gender asymmetries, and provoking a turn to the material in diaspora discourse, Choy’s narrative bears critical attention now. With this urgency in mind, I argue that *All That Matters* offers a cartographic representation of Vancouver’s Chinatown that throws into relief the material boundaries and carefully delineated places that render ethnic, classed, and especially gendered bodies immobile within diasporic space. Furthermore, I examine how Choy brings paper into view as playing a crucial role in the Chinese Canadian diaspora: paper constitutes false identities, mediates movement across borders, and enables alternate, though complex, spaces for diasporic mobility. In other words, I suggest that to engage with questions of mobility and resistance in diasporas, we need to consider both terrestrial space and the transgressive potential of *things* as they circulate within and partially compose diasporic space.

II. New Spaces for Diaspora Studies: Contextualizing *All That Matters*

While numerous works of contemporary fiction represent issues of diaspora, mobility, and even materiality, *All That Matters* invites particular consideration for both its provocative historical depiction of the Chinese Canadian diaspora on the West Coast and its own significant underrepresentation in diasporic and Asian North American scholarship. Published nine years after its prequel, *The Jade Peony* (1995), and five years after Choy’s memoir, *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood* (1999), *All That Matters* builds on the themes and motifs of these earlier texts to construct a critical and nuanced representation of Chinatown: a visceral landscape in which gender, class, and ethnic borders delimit concrete spaces. By virtue of the restrictive physical landscape of the Chinese diaspora depicted by Choy, the novel troubles ideals of diasporic mobility; at the level of the body, characters are ensnared by the named streets, toxic substances, and encoded buildings that mark Chinatown’s internal and external boundaries. While scholars have tended to read *All That Matters* as either a typical “stor[y] of unbelonging” (Madsen 103) or as an essentializing celebration of ethnic difference—what Françoise Lionnet calls autoethnography (99)—I argue that Choy’s text cannot be so easily categorized. Rather, *All That Matters* constitutes a complex critique of both national and diasporic narratives, resisting valorization of either while experimenting with alternate spaces—constituted by paper and things—of diasporic mobility. Choy situates his intervention in the everyday material conditions wrought by exclusionary national and

diasporic processes and, further, locates a fraught resistance in this same materiality.

Before turning to the novel, however, I will briefly survey some of the relevant theory that underlies my approach to *All That Matters* and from which I hope to carve a new trajectory for diaspora studies. Although critics have been slow to engage *All That Matters*, Lily Cho, Ien Ang, and Eleanor Ty provide useful contexts for Choy's work with their formidable contributions to scholarship on Chinese North American diasporas: Cho focuses on the histories of indentured labour that distinguish Chinese migration and diaspora formation; Ang turns a critical eye on the very idea of Chinese diaspora as a bounded entity; and Ty considers the ways in which Asian North American bodies have become "unfastened" (1) in the last several decades, crossing borders fluidly and negotiating new spaces. In "Asian Canadian Futures: Diasporic Passages and the Routes of Indenture," Cho imagines a future for Asian Canadian scholarship in which the critical lens of diaspora studies informs our reading of Chinese Canadian literature and lends a sense of dislocation and "precariousness" to the notion of Chinese migration (183-4). She argues that the work yet to be done in diaspora studies is "that of understanding the proleptic power of forgotten and suppressed pasts" (199). Cho's claim that diasporic pasts are always imbricated in and constitutive of diasporic presents largely informs my approach to *All That Matters*, but I also draw from Ang's critique of diasporic insularity. In "Together-in-Difference: Beyond Diaspora, into Hybridity," Ang challenges the very notion of a Chinese diaspora, calling instead for a focus on cultural hybridization. She suggests that while the Chinese diaspora provides a strategic transnational challenge to borders of nation-states, it simultaneously forms an "internally homogenizing" boundary around itself (142). Finally, Ty proposes a more optimistic view of the Chinese diaspora that takes recent changes in transnational migration, or "globality," into account;² she argues that the Asian North American experience of mobility has become more liberatory and less restricted (xvi), and she explores "how globalization and travel have pushed [Asian North Americans] to seek new spaces, both geographically and psychically" (xxviii). While I find Ty's optimistic belief in global mobility problematic inasmuch as it obscures the experiences of refugees and other migrants who do not meet the material preconditions for transpacific fluidity and overlooks the continuing bondage of racialized, gendered, and classed bodies within diasporic hostlands, I am nevertheless intrigued by her focus on "new spaces." Although Ty specifically bids us to examine psychic and geographic spaces, I contend that other material diasporic spaces, too, bear close consideration.

Such analyses lead to the preliminary question of terms: how, in the parameters of this paper, do I conceive of "space" and, even more crucially, what do I mean by "diaspora"? While definitions of "diaspora" remain varied and flexible, I use the term here to refer to communities of people dispersed from a homeland to which they retain emotional,

political, and/or economic ties. In particular, my reading of Choy's novel problematizes a postcolonial discourse of diaspora that, as David Chariandy notes, "seems to overly idealize or even celebrate experiences of dislocation and displacement ..." (n.p.). While diasporas certainly hold a powerful (and partially realized) political potential—namely that of challenging national boundaries and identities, drawing rights of citizenship into question, and facilitating transnational activism—I remain wary of the tendency to overlook diaspora's negative undertows. Avtar Brah's arguments that "the materiality of everyday life" constitutes imagined diasporic communities (183) and that *diaspora space* describes the "intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location" (208) guide my analysis of materiality, space, and diaspora in *All That Matters*. While I depart from Brah's specific conceptual framework of *diaspora space* as a site wherein "boundaries of inclusion and exclusion ... are contested" (208-9), I draw from her understandings of space to explore the implicit and potentially restrictive entanglements of diasporic peoples and landscapes. In considering diaspora's restrictive potentials, however, I remain cognizant of the oppressive historical and national contexts that occasion and enforce diasporic borders. In other words, I do not wish to essentialize or pathologize diasporic space but rather to challenge its celebrated discursive currency and to uncover the risks it might pose to diasporic subjects.

I grapple with the term *space* as a way to define how diasporic bodies—not all of them human—mediate various opportunities or obstacles to both spatial (territorial) and social mobility. For Ty, space is manifested in geographical and psychic terms, in the edifices and coordinates of *place*, and in the immaterial realms of affect and imagination. However, I attempt to address Ty's call for a focus on new spaces by conceiving of space as relational—as a negotiation between bodies (or things) and physical places that allows concepts of space to include both the figurative and the material, and that opens new ways of thinking through the limits and possibilities of diasporic mobility. Furthermore, while Brah defines borders as "arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic" (198), I consider the ways in which they are also all-too-concrete. In other words, by examining the borders, spaces, and places that constitute diaspora, I interrogate one of the most valorized and seemingly intrinsic features of diaspora: mobility.

Denoting both the physical movements of people through space and the vertical movements of individuals through the social stratum, the term "mobility" figures largely in theorizations of diaspora. Indeed, mobility is constitutive of diaspora insofar as diasporic subjects *move* (often by force or coercion) from countries of origin to new locales or hostlands. Yet, the fluidity of this transnational movement tends to be overdetermined in diasporic criticism. Displaced bodies, exhibiting mobility in migration, do not always (or often) remain mobile upon arrival at international destinations, and papers do not always travel alongside the bodies they identify but often precede or belatedly follow their arrival, assuming a

liveliness of their own. For Choy's characters, as for many actual Chinese immigrants prior to WWII, (false) identity papers become more legitimate and more mobile than the biological identities of their holders, thus constituting a new mode of being: "paper ontologies." Signaling a return of history in this current transnational moment, human diasporic mobility is almost always facilitated and often surpassed by the movement of things. In *What Do Pictures Want?* (2004), W.J.T. Mitchell provocatively contends that "in this [globalized] New World Order, freedom means the freedom of commodities (but not of human bodies) to circulate freely across borders" (150). He wonders how things—namely, images—exhibit agency, autonomy, motivation, or other signs of life (6). Likewise, in "Thing Theory," Bill Brown asks "how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, [and] how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects" (7). In other words, how do objects *act* on people? These questions become especially productive and pressing in relation to diaspora studies and to *All That Matters*, in particular, as papers travel, cross borders, and constitute "legitimate" identities—animate actions paradoxically denied to human bodies.

III. A Boundary-Ridden Landscape: Immobility in Choy's Chinatown

All That Matters presents an ideal text through which to explore diasporic matters related to space and mobility. Charting the childhood and adolescence of first son Kiam-Kim, who arrives on the West Coast with his father and grandmother (Poh-Poh) in 1926, the narrative wends its way through the landscape of Vancouver's early-twentieth-century Chinatown. Choy relays the subsequent migration of Stepmother (purchased and sent from China to join the Chen family and bear children); the adoption of second brother, Jung-Sum; and the strategic formations of family and community within a diasporic context. Kiam-Kim and his peers (Jenny, Meiying, and Jack) occupy a central focus of the narrative as they approach adulthood in the ethnically delineated spaces of WWII Vancouver. Here, the landscape is not only a fictional backdrop to diasporic experience but also a product and determining force of the diasporic community: it constitutes a dialectic of space and subjectivity. From the moment they arrive on British Columbia's west coast, Choy's characters face negotiating the specific (named) streets, buildings, and neighborhoods of their Canadian hostland. Choy repeatedly emphasizes the materiality of diasporic space and thus blurs the distinctions between place and culture, history and geography, the physical and the metaphorical.

Contrary to Ang's claim that diasporic boundaries are purely symbolic (144), *All That Matters* represents diasporic boundaries as

inscribed in the territorial space of Chinatown. For Choy, the history of transpacific migration and indentured labour becomes visible in the very (physical) entity of Chinatown, materially illustrating Cho's claim that in Asian Canadian diasporas, "the past is constitutive of the present" (195). Meanwhile, the promulgation of Chinese ethnocentrism can likewise be read in Chinatown's internal division of space. While Keefer Street marks a threshold to diasporic space that is policed from the outside, the protagonist's front porch marks an ethnic boundary policed from within. What *All That Matters* offers is a cartographic image of Vancouver's Chinatown in which topographic particularities overlay the ongoing historical processes from which they spring and are overlaid by the unseen borders they encrypt. Choy's fictional representation of diasporic space consequently tempers valorizations of mobility in diasporic criticism and, as I illuminate below, draws particular attention to the bondage of women's bodies in the diasporic hostland. Because physical places pose ethnic, gender, and class restrictions, Choy's characters become corporeally bound: borders cannot be physically transgressed without serious bodily consequences.

Throughout the novel, Choy traces the borders within Chinatown and the boundary around Chinatown to the historical, economic, and sociopolitical practices of the hostland, animating Cho's contention that the lingering colonial history of Chinese dispossession and exploitation must remain paramount in current studies of Chinese Canadian literature (186). As Rocío Davis points out, "the word Chinatown itself is laden with socio-historic connotations" (120). Disenfranchised, ostracized, and exploited by the host nation, early Chinese settlers clustered in the less desirable periphery of Vancouver. This space then became known as "Chinatown." Choy points to this historical context as the powerful but invisible Canadian government dictates the comings and goings of the fictional Chen family across the Pacific Ocean. Racist legislation determines the cost (both monetary and personal) of Chinese entry into Canada, polices national borders, and negotiates the terms of Chinese repatriation. Choy's narrator recalls that "more than fifteen or even twenty-five years before, [the bachelor men in Chinatown] had left their families in China and were now unable to bring over those same wives and families because of the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act" (15). Moreover, the Chen family's narrative reveals the reality of detainment even after successful transpacific migrations: "[Stepmother] had been, for almost three weeks, languishing in the Customs House in Victoria, which everyone called the human isolation coop ... patiently waiting for her official clearance to come into Vancouver" (41). Finally, Choy points to the precarious position of bodies in the diaspora, which remain indefinite targets of discriminatory national policies: during the economic depression of the 1930s, the Canadian government offered destitute members of the Chinese diaspora free return passage to China in return for the surrender of their immigration documents and a signed promise to never return (162). With reference to these histories of racist legislation, Choy depicts a

landscape in which all subsequent barriers inside the “Keefer Street boundaries of our ghettoed Chinatown” (33) cannot be read discretely. Davis is right to identify the “blending of the old and the new” (135) in Choy’s depiction of Chinatown, although she may be too optimistic in her reading of a “process of modification and transformation” (136). Instead, “the new” spaces and places erected by the Chinese diaspora reinforce and reenact the nationally inscribed borders and bondage of “the old.” Rather than overcoming exclusive immigration policies and escaping the bounds of the “human isolation coop” (Choy 41) to find freedom in the diasporic space of Chinatown, Stepmother enters a new form of bondage in the Chen household with her perpetual obligation to reproduce sons—another form of indentured labour.

Economic borders, in particular, remain historically linked to the racist nation-state as Choy’s characters maintain a class/power hierarchy in the geographical spaces of Chinatown. Doubly handicapped by racist labour exploitation and depressed global markets, the working-class men of Choy’s Chinatown occupy specific, bounded spaces delineated by biological signs of poverty and material markers of industry. Suggesting the dangers and toxicity of jobs available in Chinatown to Chinese workers, symbols of peril mark these economic boundaries. Always a material reminder of Chinese indentured labour, the train track carries a dragon ready to “scorch the faces of intruders” (3), while children are warned never to go near the “rainbow-glazed” skin-eating puddles that demarcate the False Creek industrial sites (13). Writing the 1930s Depression into his narrative, Choy identifies the “ragged borders” of Chinatown by the “hobo shacks ... being built in small enclaves around False Creek” (160). The protagonist is warned to “[n]ever go there” because like the “weekly-rental hotel rooms along Hastings and Main Street and in the deserted alleyways ... [t]hose places stink with death” (161). The smell of poverty and sickness biologically fortifies the boundary around the diaspora and between economic spaces. Likewise, the “rooming houses along Shanghai and Canton Alleys” where Kiam-Kim and his father collect donations for the war effort in China delimit a space of destitution marked by “decaying litter” and the smell of “unflushed toilets” (200-1). Upheld by the socioeconomic hierarchies within and without Chinatown, these spaces of poverty remain bounded. Protesting against Chinese produce merchants, white labour groups blockade the streets “in and out of Chinatown,” further aligning economic barriers with the borders of ethnically defined space, while Chinatown’s internal class borders remain equally impenetrable: Kiam-Kim observes that “the noise of [the] labourers barely pierced the thick walls of the main Tong building” (30). Originating in hegemonic power relations, structural and biological boundaries demarcate economic spaces throughout Choy’s novel.³

Similarly, the space of Chinatown and places within Chinatown become ethnically marked and restricted. While Choy repeatedly refers to Keefer Street as the threshold or “ragged border” (160) of Chinatown, a

space implicitly racialized, Kiam-Kim's house delineates further segregation within the ethnic Keefer Street borderland. Meters apart, the Irish Canadian O'Connor family and the Chen family occupy two sides of a material (fenced) ethnic boundary. Though Kiam-Kim and his blond Irish neighbour, Jack O'Connor, play together in their yards and on their porches, Poh-Poh insists that "Jack would not be welcome to step inside our door" (232). In this way, the neighbourhood landscape becomes a cartography of precisely bounded ethnic spaces in which all must follow the edict "stick to your own kind" (230). The problematic ethnocentrism exhibited by Poh-Poh and others within the Chinese diasporic community (the kind of ethnocentrism that Ian Ang warns against) incubates within the "hostile" host nation, such that "having the same last name" (a mark of ethnic connection) takes on a collective/protective value (112). Hospitals, schools, and the Canadian military demarcate their own spaces of ethnic exclusion. Jenny is barred from Catholic school and consequently, she believes, from heaven (210-1); Poh-Poh, like "Indians and blacks, Asians of every variety," is not permitted into "regular hospitals" but is instead relegated to the basement of St. Paul's Hospital (362); and Kiam-Kim is denied entry to the Canadian military where "Chinese are *not wanted*" (312). National and civic institutions etch deeper ethnic borders onto the grid of designated spaces that Choy's characters must inhabit and, in turn, compel the maintenance of internal boundaries. Just as Ang theorizes about diasporas more broadly, Choy's diasporic subjectivities are shown responding to or resisting externally imposed borders only to risk fortifying internal lines and an ethnic insularity.

The ethnic borders that Choy makes visible in *All That Matters* are aggravated by gender difference and map differently onto the bodies of Chinese men and women. Contrary to valorizations of mobility in diasporic criticism, women's bodies, in particular, suffer a double bondage. While Clifford envisions an ideal diaspora wherein women strategically mediate cultural expectations, he recognizes that "diaspora women are caught between patriarchies" (314). Gender constrictions, like the bounds of ethnicity and class, relate to cultural and institutional sexism both within the Chinese diaspora and within the sociopolitical framework of the host nation. Both structures erect barriers that deny Chinese women access to knowledge, power, wealth, public space, and even physical wellness. In reference to Stepmother's pregnancy, Kiam-Kim's father explains, "'As in Old China, as in England where the King and Queen of Canada live ... respectable women in Vancouver do not leave the house'" (151). The bondage of women's pregnant bodies to the private home space marks an intersection of Chinese and Canadian patriarchal ideals. However, even when not married or pregnant, "Chinatown girls were kept busy ... with their endless housework and homework" (279). Meiying, an academically promising young woman, is told that she had "[b]etter ... stay home for now" to become "good wife material" (399). The borders that limit women to the domestic sphere do not account for women's desires or even women's needs. Reacting to violent spousal abuse,

“Frank’s mother had tried to escape with her son three times, but Chinatown dictated that she should return” (264-5). Gender barriers around the home hold strong regardless of the physical violence within.

Furthermore, Choy’s patriarchal Chinatown denies women access to spaces of economic power and knowledge; women are excluded from Chinatown business lunches (73) and are only “permitted to know” certain elements of “*Tohng-Yahn Gaai*, China-People Street” (44). The restrictions on women’s work become particularly dire when layered over the ethnic limitations facing Chinese workers in general. While “[a]mbitious Chinese girls [dream] of office jobs,” the jobs most available to them are “not at the reception or front offices but in the back rooms” and at lower wages than the white workers they replace (309). The spatial hierarchy in these companies, whereby front room and back room jobs carry differing degrees of prestige and Chinese women receive the less visible and less lucrative positions, extends to the wider geographical location of the company itself: “Most Chinese girls and their families considered any office job outside Chinatown a *real* job” (309). Here, places where women work, live, and learn are subject to careful delineation and policing. Chinese women occupy the most severely bounded spaces in Choy’s fictional diaspora.

While Davis reads Choy’s fictionalized Chinatown as “a heterogeneous space of intersection” between the Chinese diaspora and “the mainstream” wherein subjectivities and ethnic affiliations become dynamic and mobile (120), she does not account for the materiality of borders and bodily bondage that inhibits free movement by Choy’s characters. Illustrating what Frederik Tygstrup identifies as the “seminal role of power relations in spatial relations” (202), the hegemonically inscribed borders in Choy’s fictional landscape immobilize individual bodies within the Chinese diaspora and bind the diasporic population to Chinatown’s geographical space.⁴ We know these borders are impassible not simply because they exist, but because Choy’s characters repeatedly try and fail (often with violent consequences) to subvert them. While Kiam-Kim suffers a violent racially motivated attack when he crosses the East-West Hastings divide (254-6) and Jack’s youthful border transgressions (as “the cowboy” [212] who literally crashes through windows [159]) culminate in his war-time incapacitation by fire, Choy’s female characters, especially Meiying and Jenny, illustrate the persistence of gendered diasporic bondage. Each character finally accepts the impossibility of ethnic/gender/class mobility or suffers the ultimate corporeal consequence. Either way, in Choy’s representation of the Chinese diaspora, boundary transgressions fail and borders are refortified.

Meiying enters the novel at a relatively late point in the narrative and stands out, almost immediately, as an independent and potentially mobile character. Kiam-Kim describes Meiying as “out of my league” (338-9), while Third Uncle states that “Lim Meiying is someone to admire, even from the back of a hall” (340). Yet “the beautiful Meiying,” seemingly a picture of ideal Asian femininity, “knew more about Zeros, Spitfires, and

Messerschmitts than she did about laundry and cooking” (400). Despite attempts by Chinatown elders to constrain Meiying, she appears capable of subverting boundaries. Though relegated to the home as a nanny for Sekky (the youngest Chen brother), Meiying strategically escapes this limitation, crossing not just gender but also ethnic borders. In her thorough study of Meiying’s character in *The Jade Peony*, Michelle Hartley notes that Meiying uses Sekky, her intended anchor to the domestic sphere, as an alibi for leaving the house. Playing in the park with Sekky becomes Meiying’s cover for meeting her Japanese boyfriend, Kazuo (76). Meiying’s transgression is all the more dramatic as it takes place in a moment of heightened ethnic tensions. The Powell Grounds, where Meiying meets her boyfriend, is not just the space of the Japanese Other, but also that of the war-time enemy. Chinatown children are told “never to cross Hastings Street. And never to go down to Little Tokyo” (402); the space is aggressively demarcated. Kiam-Kim knows that the Chinatown elders and people like his father and Third Uncle would not forgive anyone seen “consorting with the enemy” (403), and he thinks that if Meiying does have a Japanese boyfriend, “Mrs. Lim would kill her. Father would cut her off from Sekky ... And Stepmother would be forced to end her friendship” (405). Here, Choy draws his narrative into what Cho calls the “messy, discomfiting space” *between* minority communities, a space where another “vexed” and geographically delineated relationship “displaces the primacy of the relationship between white and nonwhite groups” (188-9).

Kiam-Kim’s concern regarding Meiying’s precarious inter-ethnic mobility, however, does not take into account the extent of her transgression. Having not only crossed the geographical barriers of the gendered home space and the ethnically inscribed landscape, Meiying has also subverted the physical restrictions on her body and been impregnated by the ethnic “enemy.” As Meiying’s sexual transgression becomes visible, she will no longer be “like the other young women of Chinatown” (399), yet the borders around Chinatown (policed from without as well as within) prohibit Meiying from actually escaping the geographic confines of her diasporic community. Unable to turn back after having “crossed the line” (415), Meiying attempts to abort her pregnancy and, “fail[ing] terribly,” causes her own death in the process (414). Just as Meiying fails in successfully crossing the borders of gender and ethnicity, her child, a symbol of ethnic border crossing, cannot survive entry into the ethnocentric space of Chinatown. Hartley argues that Meiying exemplifies “the racial consequences of being a culturally conflicted subject” (75). I would add that Meiying’s conflict plays out in a spatially defined arena and involves not only a feeling of ambivalence, but multiple purposeful border subversions. Meiying embodies the potential and the ability to cross lines, but also the inevitable failure of such transgressions at this historical moment in the Chinese Canadian diaspora.

Meiying’s failure is particularly poignant for Jenny Chong, since Meiying’s death confirms her own bondage. Choy depicts Jenny flirting

with the idea of border crossing throughout her youth, stepping briefly across lines and testing limits, but never subverting borders to the same dangerous extent as Meiying. When, as a child, Jenny challenges Chinatown's gender/age hierarchy by rebelling against Mr. Chong, the older mahjong women are scandalized to hear of "a mere girl daring to throw anything at anyone, let alone a book at her father" (90). Despite their assertion that "the women of Chinatown [must] care for each other" (89), this older generation of women punishes Jenny by reasserting her spatial bondage; Jenny is isolated in the parlour with the instruction to "[s]tay here and die" (85). Jenny must learn to "stay" in her rightful place. However, like Meiying, Jenny attempts to transgress gender borders and a patriarchal family hierarchy through the metonym of her own body. Initially, she practices these carnal transgressions with Kiam-Kim, opening her blouse (a material border between private decorum and public indiscretion) to Kiam-Kim's vision and touch, but she soon realizes that her seemingly rebellious actions actually fall within the bounds of Chinatown propriety and its goal of reproducing what Christopher Lee terms "Chineseness"—an ethnically insular diasporic identity ("Engaging" 18). Poh-Poh watches "satisfied" as Jenny seduces her ethnically appropriate and preordained partner (Choy 249). For Jenny, though, the prohibition against crossing racial lines generates a desire to do so. Pushing the boundaries further, Jenny sexually pursues the white, and therefore unsanctioned, Jack O'Connor. Because of the real nature of this diasporic boundary subversion, Jenny's liaison with Jack occurs in the underground, unmonitored, and geographically cryptic space of the Carnegie Library "morgue" (344). Here, Kiam-Kim finds Jenny inviting Jack into a "familiar blouse" and also into her body (345).

Jenny's sexual transgression, however, is not fully realized. Jack later explains that Jenny had "fantasized about [having sex with] 'a white boy ... just once,'" but when Kiam-Kim appeared in the place and moment of her border-crossing, she "pushed [him] away" (388). After Meiying's death, Kiam-Kim believes that Jenny is distraught because "she and Meiying had both crossed the line with someone not of their own kind" (415), but his (male) perspective is limited. Unlike Jenny, Meiying is committed to her border subversion and thus represented, for Jenny, the possibility of mobility. With Meiying's death, Jenny understands the dire consequences of such subversions. When Kiam-Kim proposes to Jenny, three days after Meiying's death, Jenny smashes a glass in frustration, then responds, "[w]hy not?" (416). Unable to escape the bounds of Chinatown expectations, Jenny submits to her predestined place as Kiam-Kim's wife and her gendered obligation to reproduce Chineseness (417). Jenny's acceptance of her domestic role marks her failure to cross boundaries; no longer the rebellious "tiger spirit" (90), Jenny, at the novel's end, admits that she is "a different person" (419). Constituting a corrective to both evasions and idealizations of gender in the diaspora, Choy's representation of diasporic women reveals the immobilizing consequences of double patriarchy. Rather than "opening new political

spaces” (Clifford 314), Choy shows diaspora reinscribing constrictive gender roles.

IV. Paper Ontologies in the Diaspora: Reading Matter in *All That Matters*

In Choy’s text, diasporic Chinese bodies that attempt to transgress borders suffer violent consequences that deter others from doing the same. However, Choy’s characters do find alternate, albeit disembodied, means of border crossing. Because of racist immigration policies intended to restrict new Chinese immigrants through exorbitant fees introduced in 1885, 1900, and 1903, and outright prohibition from entry into Canada in 1923, Chinese immigrants, like Choy’s fictional Chen family, historically sought to enter Canada by means of more creative practices such as the doctoring of immigration papers.⁵ Paper represents a significant tool of diasporic mobility throughout Choy’s novel; in the form of identity documents, labour contracts, money, emblems, and art, paper successfully subverts the same boundaries that prevent the passage of flesh. Other things (glass shards, amulets, wind chimes) appear and become animate throughout Choy’s text, countering or throwing into relief the immobility of human characters, but none carry the same weight as paper. For the Chinese diaspora in Choy’s Chinatown, life, ontological legitimacy, and family ties often reside in the materiality of paper rather than the genealogy of blood. However, while paper (in its immunity to material consequences) effectively transgresses national, ethnic, gender, and class boundaries in lieu of embodied mobility and sometimes facilitates survival in the diaspora, it often carries a steep price.

Unable to access Canada either legally or financially through other means, and eager to leave China’s famine and civil war, the Chen family (Father, Kiam-Kim and Poh-Poh) become the “*maaih-gee ga-ting*, [the] ‘bought-paper family’” of a wealthy merchant in Vancouver (6). This merchant who can afford to sponsor the Chen family becomes “Third Uncle,” an uncle related by paper rather than blood. Successful in transporting Kiam-Kim and his family across the geopolitical border into Canada, falsified birth and immigration papers nonetheless commit their bodies to a different kind of thrall: Kiam-Kim ominously declares that “these ghost papers *bonded* us as Third Uncle’s Gold Mountain Family” (italics mine 27), and upon recognizing his new family’s willing subservience, Third Uncle contentedly observes that “his paper family knew their place” (27). While overcoming the transnational obstacles raised by ethnicity and nation, ghost papers simultaneously re-inscribe an economic bondage that echoes the indentured relations of Chinatown’s history.

Furthermore, ghost papers facilitate the bondage of Chinese women rather than freeing them from the strictures of home- or host-land.

Stepmother's mobility across the Pacific, mediated by falsified identity documents, renders her the property of Father, her quasi-husband, and Third Uncle, her purchaser. Her debt to both must be paid by producing male heirs (16). Stepmother's passage across national borders comes at the expense of her female agency, requiring in exchange the confinement of her body within the gendered borders of Chinatown and the Chen house. Finally, and regardless of gender, each member of the "paper family" runs the constant risk of having their biological identity discovered and of being deported. Though their bodies have crossed the Canadian border, they are haunted by their documents' illegitimacy and by their subsequent precariousness in the diasporic hostland. Poh-Poh warns Kiam-Kim never to mention his paper relationship to Third Uncle or "we go back to China on next boat" (35). Just as the fickle paperwork assists bodies across borders, it might as easily betray those same bodies or be taken away.

Paper plays similarly enabling and disabling roles in the form of currency and contracts. Kiam-Kim, Father, and Poh-Poh begin their Vancouver lives in a Shanghai Alley Rooming House adjacent to the warehouse district and "the oily smells and train-clanging sounds of False Creek" (11). They occupy the bounded space of Chinatown's poorest labourers. However, paper presents the opportunity for class mobility. In order to access the space of higher class status—"houses with even bigger rooms along Keefer and East Pender streets, houses [with] comfortable parlours" (26)—contracts must be brought into play. Though Father "had already signed papers held between Third Uncle and the Chen Society that he would pay back a large portion of their sponsorship expenses" (26), he now signs more contracts in order to secure his family's place in a "two-storey house on Keefer Street" (28). The paperwork that enables this upward social mobility further embroils Father in the ominous side of paper facilitation: he is bound to the policing role of "monthly rent collector" and recorder of "membership loans and accounts" for the powerful Chen Society (28). Father's paper mobility requires him to ensure the immobility of others.

Similarly, the internment of Japanese Canadians during WWII poses an opportunity for the Chinese diaspora to expand its geographical borders at the expense of others' bondage. Predicated on the rampant anti-Japanese sentiment in both the Chinese and wider Canadian populations, the Tong family associations stand to benefit financially from the government's seizure of Japanese ("whether Canadian citizens or not") property (408). Paper mediates this potential spatial and financial mobility for Chinatown residents in two ways. First, the actual property in question, "to be sold at auction" (408), involves the paper exchange of Canadian currency for deeds to buildings and land. In order to overcome the limitations of Chinatown, its inhabitants must "put up some money to invest in the properties along Powell Street" (408). Second, paper functions as a medium of propaganda; posters reading "GOOD-BYE JAPS!" and depicting "buck-toothed Japanese soldier[s] ... burning up the forests of B.C." (408) promote paranoia and justify Chinese exploitation

of Japanese Canadians. Meanwhile, Father's newspaper articles, written "to support the merchants' grasp of the financial potential" (409), facilitate Chinatown's economic mobility. Here, paper mediates the expansion of Chinatown borders at the expense of a neighbouring ethnic population.

Countering these fraught examples in which paper mediates borders at high personal and ethical costs, Choy peppers his narrative with alternative paper facilitations. While government documents, contracts, and currency demand high interest for their use in border transgressions, paper manifested as cultural emblem and artistic expression mediates borders in the cultural diaspora without cost. The Kitchen God, "an ancient warrior printed on a small poster stuck just above the stove" (72), typifies this ideal form of border mediation. Ceremonially burned and replaced each Chinese New Year, the Kitchen God "journey[s] to heaven to report on the family" (76). Unlike Jack, who is painfully debilitated by fire during his failed attempt to "get ... far away" (330), the Kitchen God is "transformed by the fire into smoke" (76). The traditional paper emblem operates in the Chen family's service to traverse boundaries that flesh cannot. Similarly, Kiam-Kim's and Jack's ethnically specific comic books subvert the strict cultural bounds that keep the neighbours away from one another's houses. Jack reads Kiam-Kim's Chinese comics "on the floor in the parlour and in bed" (79). These particularities of place speak to the comic books' unbounded mobility as the paper tokens venture into otherwise forbidden spaces. Likewise, though Meiying is corporeally bound to the gendered space of the home, she gains access to the public sphere through her writing. The *Colonist* publishes Meiying's essay on the Great War, and "all the Chinese papers repor[t] on her success" (400). Paper carries Meiying's ideas beyond the household and even beyond Chinatown. Meiying then shares the transporting power of paper with Sekky, who uses scraps of magazine to create a magical land, expanding the spatial borders of his mostly homebound Chinatown existence beyond the limitations of geographical reality (404). Lastly, paper mediates embodied resistance; Jenny rebels against her father by throwing a school scribbler and challenges her ethnic and gender bondage by "cross[ing] the line" (415) with Jack in the Carnegie Library morgue, a paper archive. In its cultural dimensions, paper's potential to subvert borders and counter forms of corporeal bondage seems promising.

Finally, just as Choy's fictional papers transgress borders that his characters' bodies cannot, the paper medium of his text also demands consideration, especially in relation to real diasporic bodies. As winner of the 2004 Trillium Book Award, contender for the 2006 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, and member of the 2004 Globe and Mail's Top 100 Reading List, *All That Matters* achieved both critical and popular success. As a result, the material text continues to circulate through national, social, and public spaces, in fact facilitated by Choy's ethnicity, which is fetishized in multicultural marketplace, and unhindered by the borders that bind marked diasporic bodies. Arguably, the novel's wide success hinges on the high currency of what Choy calls "the

multicultural voice,” which becomes less threatening (to a white liberal readership) in paper than in corporeality (“Beyond”). While this disparity between the freedom of diasporic fiction and the restriction of diasporic people remains deeply problematic and highlights an ongoing contradiction within multiculturalism, it also re-emphasizes the autonomy of paper and things, which attain mobility that flesh, often, cannot.

V. Diasporic Futures: The Potential of *Things*

The relationship between paper and borders that Choy depicts and embodies in his own act of diasporic fiction carries significant implications beyond literary representations of diasporas, speaking to diasporic spaces and movements more broadly. The way paper circulates across national borders and within diasporic hostlands, the mobilizing and simultaneously restricting power of paper ontologies, the autonomy and agency exhibited by paper, and the various incarnations of paper as official, cultural, or artistic *thing* all deserve further consideration in future diaspora studies. Moreover, as paper remains a contested space in the politics of diaspora, where migrants and border officials vie for control of identity documents and their authenticity, the increasing value of other things demands critical attention of its own. Just as falsified identity documents challenge ontological borders, shifting the legitimacy of being away from flesh and into paper, so too have other materialities begun troubling what Brown recognizes as the dichotomy between thinking and thingness (16). In the ensuing tension between ontological borders, these things continue to raise the question: who (or what) manages to cross diasporic borders and who (or what) does not?

Last October, news releases across B.C.’s lower mainland flaunted side by side photographs of an elderly Caucasian man and a young Asian man with a censor bar over his eyes. According to reports, the two photos depicted the same man with and without a silicone mask. Ensnared in the wrinkled plastic skin of a white senior, a Chinese man in his early twenties had boarded an Air Canada plane in Hong Kong and emerged from his guise midway through the Vancouver-bound flight. Upon landing, border officials met and detained the man, who subsequently requested refugee status. Government officials and media treated this particular border crossing as exceptionally menacing, a threat to the perceived truth of flesh as a racial signifier, the false rhetoric of egalitarian mobility, and the real, policed boundary of transnational transportation.

The circumstances of this (albeit arrested) transpacific migration point to the significant imbrication of things in acts of diasporic mobility. Unlike paper, which inscribes the constructed identity of migrants seeking cross-border mobility, here skin and silicone merge in a strategic blurring of bodily boundaries. Of course, the enabling agent is not only silicone, but silicone in the form of a white face—a testament to the continuing

impenetrability of ethnic borders and the unequal freedom of white subjects in the present moment. Furthermore, the devaluation of paper in proximity to the white mask (whose whiteness seemingly obviates the need for legitimate documentation) speaks to the heightened significance of paper and things for racialized bodies.

While throwing the inequalities associated with cross-border mobility into relief, the silicone mask also highlights the provocative potential of things to mediate new diasporic movements and to challenge extant boundaries. The reaction of the Canadian government to the masked man's transpacific crossing testifies to the subversive and surprising power of things. In the words of government officials, it was "an unbelievable case of concealment" (Woo). Connoting threat, the term "concealment" here refers not to weapons or toxic substances but to the Asian face of a young would-be migrant; his racialized, undocumented body becomes the ominous "concealed" entity trespassing the guarded space of national borders. The masked man's mid-flight transformation thus signifies simultaneously persisting embodied immobilities and potential material border subversions. Moreover, occurring in the transpacific space of the moving airplane, the masked man's revelation marks an undeniable intersection of mobility, bodies, and things—an intersection that holds rich potential for the future of diaspora studies and diasporic populations alike. As evinced by the Tamil migrants awaiting paper "identification" in detention centres along the West Coast and by the partially successful border crossing of an Asian man in a white silicone mask, the concrete borders and material subversions depicted in Choy's fictional diaspora continue to matter for our present moment. As the bondage of diasporic bodies persists, manifesting new forms and shifting between legal and more insidious constraints, we face the critical task of uncovering and tracing diasporic (im)mobilities in new and unexpected spaces.

Notes

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2. Ty borrows from Manfred Steger to define globality as "a social condition characterized by the existence of global economic, political, cultural, and environmental interconnections and flows that make many of the currently existing borders and boundaries irrelevant" (xiii).

3. For a historical analysis of class gradations within Canada's Chinatowns and the relative (linguistic, cultural, political, and

transpacific) mobility negotiated by a small but powerful minority of Chinese immigrants, see Lisa Rose Mar's *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era, 1885-1945*.

4. According to Tygstrup, spatial dominance is manifested in the confinement and/or exclusion of populations in/from particular areas and "the power of sovereignty and command over the bodies of others" (202).

5. See Lily Cho's "Rereading Chinese Head Tax Racism: Redress, Stereotype, and Antiracist Critical Practice" for an analysis of the head tax and the ways it may have served to maintain systems of indentured labour rather than to prevent Chinese immigration.

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